

**TIJANA BOROVCAC****CHILDREN VOICES IN RESEARCH****Abstract**

The perspective of ‘children as social actors’ has created a field with new ethical dilemmas and responsibilities for researchers within the social study of childhood. According to experiences of conducting ethnographic video studies in mixed age kindergarten groups, this paper reflects on the processes of negotiating initial and ongoing consent, problematizes the notion of ‘informed’ consent in exploratory research with young children, and considers questions of anonymity when collecting and reporting on visual data. The paper proposes that by adopting a flexible, reflective stance, researchers can learn much from children about their perspectives and the inclusion of young children in the research process.

Key words: research with children, ethics, consent

**Introduction**

The changed perspective on children brought by contemporary scientific knowledge on child development and the possibilities of their early childhood education is called a new paradigm by many scientists. Miljak (1996) states that the new paradigm of early education replaces the old, frequently called average practical kindergarten tradition. The outlook on the context of development and education changes, and the question of creating an optimal environment for learning, care and education in institutional conditions arises. The increase of institutionalization of childhood is characteristic of postmodern societies, which are regarded as open, individualized, critical, responsible and free of rigid theories and social systems, but at the same time are associated with the need for an efficient workforce. Dahlberg and Moss (2006) observe the institutionalized development of early childhood education in the context of changed social and economical family conditions. Younger children are enrolled in nurseries and kindergarten, and the period of their stay in institutions is prolonged therefore there is a greater need for monitoring the quality of preschool education. Qvortrup (1986) notices that psychology and pedagogy are becoming more oriented towards observing children at the micro and meso level, dealing with specific problems or specific groups of children. Opposite to them, sociology, history and anthropology try to approach the problem at the macro level by examining the basic childhood conditions in the past and present. They particularly insist on a comparative research of childhood and growing up conditions. Prout and James (1997, p. 8) list several key elements for understanding the “new paradigm in childhood sociology”: “a) social relationships are worthy of study, regardless of the perspective and concerns of adults; b) childhood is a social construction, neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups; c) childhood is a historical and cross-cultural variable and it cannot be separated from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity; d) children are, and must be seen as active participants in the construction and determination of their own social lives,

the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live; e) qualitative methods are the most appropriate way of investigating children and childhood”.

When observing the social competence of children Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (2005) state that empirical research should be based on the idea of children as competent social actors, which requires the researches to set the study in empirical conditions of a child's real, ordinary, everyday life. However, these empirical circumstances, or “arenas of action” as they call them, can be both enabling and constraining in terms of a child's capacity to display social competencies. Further on, in order to adequately understand the properties of a child's social competence in the “arenas” in which it is situated, it is necessary to attempt to view the relevant social action ‘from within’, to reveal the procedures by which the participants themselves organize and make sense of their activities in a given social context.

Pedagogic researches of early and preschool education in Croatia in the last fifteen years are based on the qualitative paradigm, starting from the latest scientific findings about children, early childhood education in family and institutional environments (Maleš, 2011). Researchers determine for qualitative participatory research (especially action and ethnographic research), carried out in natural environments, directly immersed into the context.

Research involving young children used to be largely conducted in psychology and contributed to the discourse of the universal and psychological child. Johansson (2011) states that the cognitive child has been (and still is) considered as an object of research whose development is described through “linear and universal stages” (Berthelsen, 2009 according to Johansson, 2011). Ontology, epistemology and methodology within this tradition have been criticized for ignoring the child's perspective and neglecting children as persons and participants of their own lives and culture (Greene, 1998). More recently, a new discourse which sees children as social actors with all their autonomous rights has appeared. They are the co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture, and childhood is becoming accepted as a socially constructed context. Johansson (2011), exploring the position of children in studies, points out that in political and educational contexts, as well as in practice, we can find a frequent tendency of referring to a “child's perspective” (Halldén, 2003 according to Johansson, 2013). Sociologists, psychologists and pedagogues stress the importance of a child's perspective, as well as the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which emphasizes the participatory rights of children. There is a growing interest in acquiring knowledge about the lives of young children and their learning in educational institutions. While previous childhood research concepts were based mainly on the concept of childhood from the adult's point of view, new approaches turn to the real relationship between adults and children. By using new theoretical and methodological tools, researchers are now able to go beyond testing assumptions on how differences in the environment can predict group differences or identifying some of the characteristics, but instead they can observe the dynamics and the transactions between a child and the environment, argues Edwards et al. (2006), which is especially important when observing the social interaction of children in mixed age groups.

The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)<sup>1</sup> is the first international document in which the child is viewed as an equal citizen with rights, and not just as a person in need of special protection and care. The Convention<sup>2</sup> primarily reminds the adults of the obligations to children as well as the obligations of numerous social factors concerning the protection of the child. In contrast to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) which, as a moral force, has laid down the path to a better understanding of children and childhood, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a document which legally binds the parties to comply with its provisions and includes the right to monitor the implementation in countries which have accepted and ratified it. This document has given a voice to children, it is widely represented in international initiatives that have in various ways operationalized the requirements placed upon them having signed this document. The Republic of Croatia, as one of the signatories to the Convention, through the Government's advisory body – the Council for Children, whose task is to promote and protect children's rights in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, drafted in 2003 the Ethical Code for Research with Children, based on international legislation. The Code seeks to regulate the status of children participating in "humanities, social, educational, medical and all other studies that can directly or indirectly influence the integrity of the child as a whole person" (Ethical Code, 2003, p. 9), as well as the status of the parent/guardian and researcher. The idea behind this Code is not to understand and regulate the ethical conduct with children as a fixed, unchangeable frame but on the contrary as "ethical standards which require continuous reviewing and improvement". All researchers working with children must have a lifelong ethical conduct, and encourage colleagues, associates, students, employers and all with whom they come in professional contact on behaving ethically and to continuously discuss about ethical issues" (Ethical Code, 2003, p. 14). Marković (2008) however notes that the Code is in its making limited by numerous notions which are not unique to it, but arise equally from daily, political and academic understanding of children and "their integrity as whole persons". Johansson (2011) believes that it is very simple to identify the contradictions if the researchers pay attention and examine whose "voice" is truly heard, and whose voice is neglected in research. Kjørholt (2011) according to Johansson (2011) argues that the voices of children are always part of the adult's discourse. The voices of young children are also voices of different interests, conflicts, values and political preferences. Johansson (2011) further quotes Kjørholt (2011), who predicts a danger if the children's voices discourse turns into a hegemony of power and becomes a political and ideological strategy in research.

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 1989, and it is the strongest type of international agreement. It is widely supported, ratified by 192 countries, thus promising the enforcement of its laws, policies and practices, as well as regular reporting to the UN in regard to the progress of child's rights. The Republic of Croatia is also a signatory to this treaty.

<sup>2</sup> Here in after the abbreviation "Convention" will be used for the "United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child".

### Question of consent

Ethical research entails a respect for privacy and trust, as well as written consent or refusal (Christensen & James, 2000), which adds up to the question of the participant's age. Lansdown (2005) reminds us that all children who can express their viewpoint, including early age and preschool children, have the right to decide whether or not they wish to participate in a research, and it is therefore necessary to place an imperative on the research with children under 8 years of age, and how to conduct them. The Ethical Code for Research with Children (2003) in Croatia resolved this question of consent and age in a way that parents/guardians give a written or oral consent for the child's participation in the study, however it is interesting that the Code states that "the purpose and the method of conducting the research must be explained to a child older than 7 years of age and below the age of 14 in accordance with his maturity" (Ethical Code, 2003). The question arises, why does not the purpose and the method of conducting the research have to be explained to children under 7 years of age, in accordance with their capabilities of course, as we consider children as full members of society regardless of their age? Penn (2008, p. 141) also asks the question "when are children old enough to be competent to consent?" Further on, Penn (2008) states that even though children of all ages can understand and give consent to research, much depends on each child's experience and confidence, the type of research, and the skills with which the researcher talks with children and helps them not to feel any pressure. "Children aged 3 years upwards have willingly taken part in research, not only as subjects but also as researchers" (Penn, 2008, p. 141).

However, researchers can find themselves in situations where they need to respect the children if they refuse or want to quit or withdraw from the study. Skånfors (2009) talks about these situations which can put the researcher in ethical dilemmas concerning the resistance to participation in the study. Skånfors (2009) claims that children can explicitly tell the researcher to leave, refuse to answer questions, pull away or show their displeasure by ignoring his presence. In these situations the researcher should withdraw and take note, but at the same time remain sensitive to the child's actions and reactions towards the researcher. This child's reaction does not necessarily mean the withdrawal of the child from the research, but can mean a temporary rejection to participate in the research process. The before mentioned should be a basis for reflecting on "ethical sensitivity" or "ethical radars" for research with children, considering that it requires from the researcher to carefully observe the children's actions and understanding, not just in terms of the collection of data, but also in the context of the impact of the research process on their worlds, rather than just relying on children's verbal acceptance or consent given by parents (Skånfors, 2009, p. 16).

Childhood studies were given additional incentive by the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which proclaimed children as the citizens of the world with all their rights, the right for protection, participation and general well-being, which lead to an "explosion" in child and childhood studies. Penn (2008) notes that from the mid 1980's, the interest for children and childhood has rapidly increased. Corsaro (2011) agrees and adds that the increased number of studies has had a positive contribution to raising the quality of institutional education. Children and childhood have been studied within a wide range of disciplines linked to the

social humanistic rather than the natural sciences, which include sociology, pedagogy, media culture, anthropology, history, law, literature, geography, economy, philosophy... Once again the concepts of the child, childhood and adulthood and their relationship to one another, views about values, rights and ethic relations to children are being rethought. Also, the methods of collecting and analyzing data concerning children have been subjected to careful observation within various disciplines (Penn, 2008), and we believe that they still are. For Woodhead (2012, p. 47) interdisciplinary childhood studies represent "a meeting point for different perspectives on early childhood".

## **Methodology**

This paper will present some of the ethical questions which have appeared during the ethnographic research of social interactions of children in mixed age kindergarten groups (children between 2 and 6 years old).

The aim of this research was to gain insight into the nature of social interaction of children, their social status and social competencies in a cross-peer preschool group as the context within which children are socialized. The study used a range of methods including different methods and techniques of field work and of ethnographic work (observation, interviews, video recordings of the children and preschool teachers) in order to gain full insight into the totality of the environment of one preschool education group within which the social interaction of children of different ages takes place. When discussing ethics in research with children, just by choosing the methodology, data collection and data analysis we have come across a variety of ethical issues and dilemmas. Cohen et al. (2007) state that a researcher will often discover that in most studies marked as qualitative or interpretative, methodological and ethical questions are tightly intertwined.

## **Ethical considerations**

At the beginning of the research we needed to obtain consent. The researcher talked to the principal, pedagogues and kindergarten teachers where the research would be conducted and explained the aim, methodology and the course of the research. Through these discussions, she obtained insight into what the adults, as 'gatekeepers' to the institution expected and required of her. Having obtained the institution's consent, a parents meeting was arranged in which the parents met the researcher. She explained to them the aim and the course of the research, the data collection methods as well as the responsibilities of the researcher. In accordance with the Ethical Code for Research with Children, the parents were given a written consent form explaining that the personal information of all participants will be fully protected and anonymous, that the results will be used only for research purposes, and that the participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any moment. The parents gave a written consent allowing their child to participate in the study. It seemed that the research could finally begin, however, one parent withdrew his consent on the first day. The question arose whether we should talk to the parents once again and try to determine the reasons for withdrawal. Would that be ethical? With the help of the kindergarten teachers who are in contact with the parents on a daily basis, it was decided that the researcher will not contact the

parents again because it might create unwanted tensions between the teachers and parents, therefore the reasons for withdrawal remained unknown to the researcher. This situation significantly complicated the research because whenever the child in question entered the movie frame, the video footage could no longer be used. Considering that other children mentioned the child as a friend and playmate, the question arose how to use this data while protecting the child without consent? What to do if the child without consent wishes to participate in the research?

The child's consent is as important as parental consent. According to the Ethical Code for Research with Children parents/guardians give a written or oral consent for children under 14 years of age, however the purpose and the method of conducting the research have to be explained to children over 7 years of age. If it is necessary to explain the purpose, is it also necessary to ask for their consent? What to do in a research with children between 3 and 7 years of age? Since the study's theoretical framework lies within the new sociology of childhood, which emphasizes that children are not passive objects but rather competent and active agents, it was decided that the purpose and method of conducting the research will be explained to the children in accordance with their maturity but also that their consent will be asked. Viewing children as having agency means viewing children as capable of reflecting upon and making decisions about things that concern them, and recognizing that their actions have consequences (Mayall, 2002). Alderson and Montgomery (1996) claim that children can participate in decision-making at four levels: 1. Being informed; 2. Expressing a view; 3. Influencing the decision-making; 4. Being the main decider.

Children generally gave their consent verbally or non-verbally, mostly taking an interest in the technology used during the research (video camera, photo camera, voice recorder). When the research began there were situations when a child turned his back to the researcher making it clear that he did not wish to be filmed, or said that they did not want to talk at that moment, which was respected. However, there were also situations when the child without consent wanted to participate in the interview along with his peers and wanted to see the footage in which he interacted with them. How to balance between the parents' decision and the child's wish to participate in the research? What consequences can the separation of the child from his peer group for the protection of his identity have on the child? Do social relationships within the group and the social status of the child fall apart?

## **Conclusion**

The major barriers to children's voices being heard in research can be overcome by understanding that children can participate in meaningful ways if they feel safe, supported and valued in the research environment. The research environment must be seen through the child's eyes. Strategies that support not only children's abilities but also the social structure in which they live, must be adopted. According to what Skanfors (2009) concludes we agree that merely following the research-ethical principles does not seem to be enough; having an 'ethical radar' is also important in research with children. Every research is unique and poses new ethical questions and dilemmas which will improve the status of children in research and the obligation to respect their rights.

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